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(72) Inventor: McGraw, Montgomery C.
Spring, Texas 77379 (US)

(74) Representative: Brunner, Michael John
GILL JENNINGS & EVERY
Broadgate House
7 Eldon Street
London EC2M 7LH (GB)

(30) Priority: 27.03.1998 US 49631

(71) Applicant: Compaq Computer Corporation
Houston, Texas 77070-2698 (US)

(54) System and method for automated calibration monitoring and reporting of print capacity and printer ink and toner levels

(57) A technique for monitoring, calibrating and reporting the remaining print capacity of an ink or toner cartridge is disclosed. Calibration of the remaining print capacity associated with a specific printer cartridge is done in terms of the number of pages or the number of days. The printer driver keeps track of the ink or toner usage, time of last replacement of a cartridge and the initial ink or toner capacity of a cartridge. This is used to

generate a graphical or digital display on a user-selectable page or a day scale. In an extension of this technique, a user-specifiable replacement threshold is provided to the printer driver. If the remaining print capacity falls below the threshold a user alert is generated. This low ink or toner warning can be either aural and/or visual and can optionally be extended to permit on-line reordering of the ink or toner cartridge.

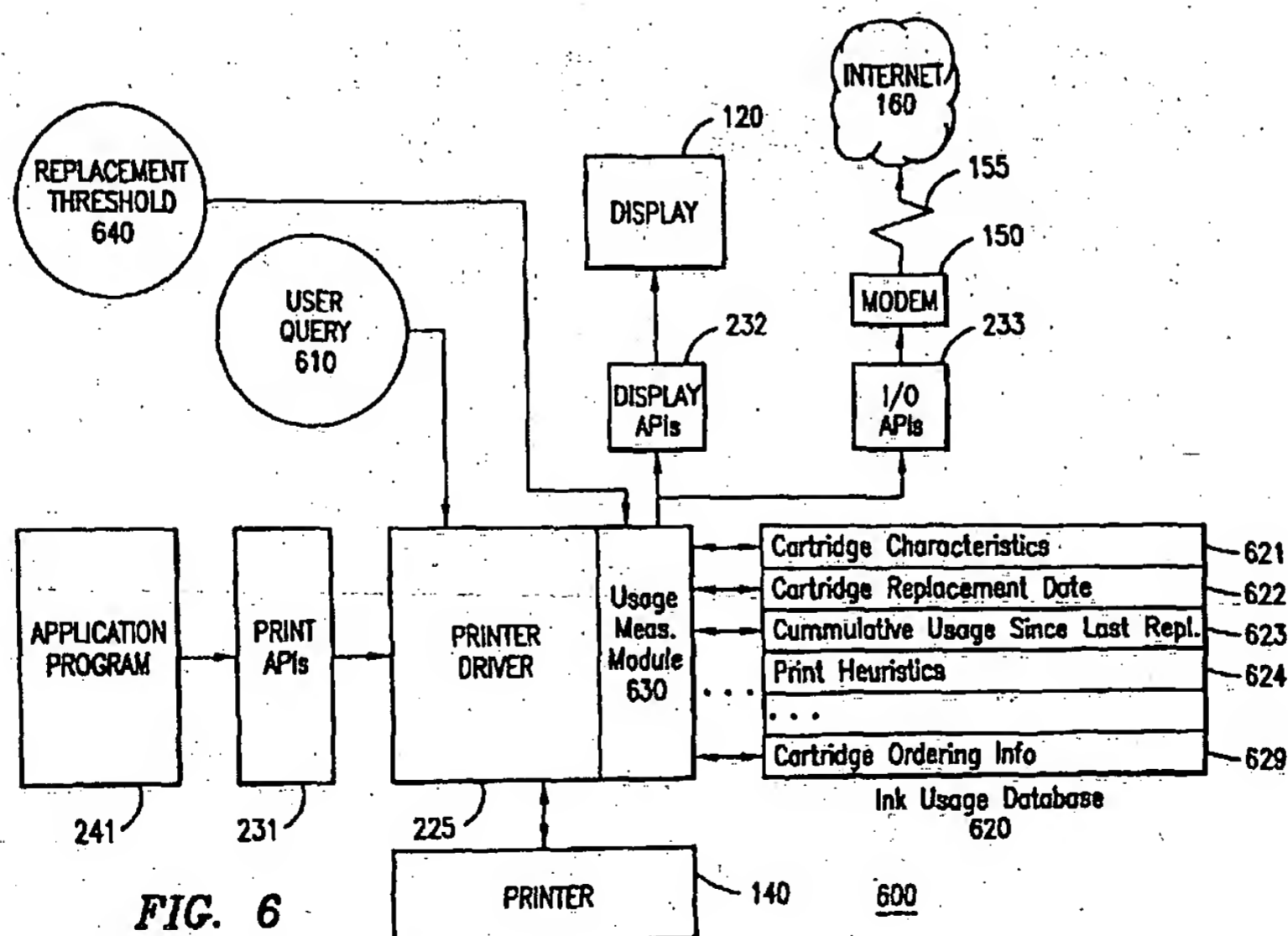


FIG. 6

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Description

[0001] The invention relates to the field of printing technology, and more particularly, to techniques for the automated monitoring and reporting of ink and toner levels in ink-jet and laser printer cartridges.

[0002] The use of inexpensive printers has expanded remarkably in recent years. Even ink-jet printers are now capable of printing near photo quality colour images. However, this usually requires that a special type of paper be used. Since some of these special types of printer papers are not truly made of paper, such printing materials will generally be referred to as "print media" in the present patent application.

[0003] Ink-jet printers typically draw their ink from one or more ink cartridges. These ink cartridges are typically translucent if not opaque. Furthermore, certain ink-jet manufacturers include a spongy material inside the cartridges to control the rate of flow of ink from the cartridge. Under certain conditions the ink in an ink cartridge might be viscous enough to attach to the walls of the cartridge. All of these foregoing factors make it difficult -- if not impossible -- for a user to determine the amount of ink remaining in an ink cartridge of an ink-jet printer, let alone obtain information about the remaining print capacity of an ink-jet cartridge.

[0004] In an effort to facilitate obtaining information about ink level in a cartridge, certain manufacturers have included a graphical ink level indicator in the printer driver software. These ink level indicators let a user determine the exact level of ink in the cartridge, based upon information received from the printer by either optical or electronic means.

[0005] It would be desirable if information about the amount of ink remaining in an ink-jet printer cartridge could be conveyed to a user in terms of the number of days or pages that may be printed before the ink cartridge needs replacement or refilling. It would also be helpful if information about the remaining print capacity of an ink-jet printer cartridge could be conveyed to a user by graphical or digital display means.

[0006] It has additionally been found desirable to associate this "print capacity" information with a threshold function in order to generate a timely warning about the impending exhaustion of an ink-jet cartridge. Still further, it would be desirable for a computer system to be able to monitor ink consumption and automatically generate a warning to a user when the ink in an ink-jet cartridge is too low, or about to run out. It would also be useful if the low ink level alert message generated by the system were also to provide a user with the specific part number and ordering information for the cartridge that is about to be exhausted.

[0007] It would additionally be desirable if information about the average size of individual ink drops as well as information about the amount of ink that is loaded in a cartridge at the time of manufacturing were used to calibrate a graphical or digital ink level display. It would also

be helpful if the graphical or digital display of the remaining print capacity is visually depicted in a way as to make it useful to a variety of users -- from a home user who uses an ink-jet printer only occasionally to a home office or a small office where an ink-jet printer may be used moderately to heavily.

[0008] It is a shortcoming and deficiency of the prior art that the desirable and helpful features discussed above have not been functionally obtained to date.

[0009] It is therefore a primary object of the present invention to automate the calibration, monitoring and reporting of the ink level in printing devices using ink cartridges. It is a further object of the present invention to provide a calibrated graphical or digital display of the ink level in an ink cartridge. It is also an object of the present invention to provide the calibration in practical and useful terms such as by expressing the remaining print capacity of an ink cartridge in terms of the number of pages or the number of days that may be printed before the ink cartridge needs to be replaced.

[0010] It is also an object of the invention to compute the remaining ink capacity of an ink cartridge using information about usage patterns of a specific ink cartridge/printer combination. It is an additional object of the present invention to use such heuristic information as obtained from a variety of sources, e.g., information provided by the manufacturer of the ink cartridge or the printer, information from a third-party or information generated internally within a printer or computer system.

[0011] According to the teachings of the present invention, information about the average size of individual ink drops and the amount of ink loaded into an ink cartridge at the time of manufacture is used to calibrate the graphical ink level indicator in conjunction with, *inter alia*, information about the average usage rate or other heuristics. In one aspect of the present invention, the actual graphical or digital ink level display is depicted using page-level or day-level scale markers (e.g., 42 pages, 25 days, etc.).

[0012] In another embodiment of the present invention, the graphical display depicts the remaining print capacity of a particular ink-jet printer cartridge in user-friendly terms, e.g., in terms of the number of days or the number of pages of print capacity remaining. In yet another embodiment of the present invention, the remaining print capacity is indicated by a digital readout.

[0013] In one aspect, the present invention is an enhanced printer driver that provides significant new functionality beyond the traditional role of handling print requests directed at a printing device. The enhanced printer driver of the present invention has particular utility directed at cartridge-based printing devices, in that it can estimate and display the remaining print capacity associated with a print cartridge.

[0014] The enhanced printer driver of the present invention comprises a usage measurement software and/or firmware and/or hardware module that can calculate (either by estimation or by actual measurement) the ink

or toner consumption associated with each print request that is forwarded to the printer. The enhanced printer driver maintains a database of information about the initial ink capacity of each print cartridge and the cumulative prior ink or toner consumption associated with the print cartridge.

[0015] The enhanced printer driver uses print heuristics to estimate the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge. This estimate of remaining print capacity may be displayed by a user by querying the enhanced printer driver of the present invention. The enhanced printer driver is capable of displaying the remaining print capacity in several different ways, e.g., in terms of the number of days, the number of pages, etc.

[0016] In an different aspect, the system and method of the present invention can additionally generate an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with a printer cartridge falls below a preset threshold. This preset threshold may be specified in several different ways, e.g., in terms of the number of days, the number of pages, etc.

[0017] The enhanced printer driver of the present invention additionally includes software elements that automatically generate an alert signal when the remaining print capacity of a print cartridge falls below the preset threshold. This alert signal can be aural and/or visual, and may further be displayed either at printer or on one or more specified computer monitors.

[0018] A more complete understanding of the method and system of the present invention may be obtained by reference of the detailed description of the preferred embodiments that follow, taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, wherein:

FIGURE 1 is an overview diagram of a typical computer system from a hardware perspective;

FIGURE 2 is an overview diagram of a typical computer system from a software perspective;

FIGURE 3 is a simplified overview of the printing process in a typical ink-jet printer;

FIGURES 4A, 4B & 4C are simplified diagrammatic representations of the print medium path in a typical printer from the front, the side, and the top, respectively;

FIGURE 5 illustrates the details of a print head in typical ink-jet printer;

FIGURE 6 is a block diagram of the ink-level calibration, monitoring and reporting system of the present invention;

FIGURES 7A & 7B are exemplary illustrations of two page-level display modes used in the present invention; and

FIGURES 8A & 8B are exemplary illustrations of two day-level display modes used in the present invention.

[0019] FIGURE 1 is an overview diagram of a typical computer system from a hardware perspective. A typical

computer system 100 comprises a processor unit 110 connected to a display 120 via a display connection 125.

The processor unit 110 is also connected to a variety of input/output devices. As shown in FIGURE 1, the processor unit 110 is connected to a keyboard 130 through a keyboard connection 135. Although not shown in FIGURE 1, the processor unit 110 may be connected to other input/output devices such as to a modem 150.

[0020] The processor unit 110 communicates with a printer 140 over a printer connection 145. In the first generation of personal computers, the printer connection 145 was typically a serial link. Later, when semiconductor memory had become affordable for use in peripheral devices, printers began to have buffers for storing information transmitted from the processor unit 110. This development lead to the printer connection 145 becoming a faster parallel link. In these earlier generations of printers, the printer connection 145 was both direct (rather than multiplexed) and unidirectional (i.e. from the processor unit 110 to the printer 140).

[0021] In contrast, with current generations of computers, it is no longer necessary for the connection 145 between the processor unit 110 and the printer 140 to be a direct physical connection. It has become possible and common to connect a printer 140 to one or more computers over a high speed network connection.

[0022] Just as the speed of the printer connection 145 has increased with successive advances in computing technology, it is also now possible for the printer connection 145 to be bidirectional in certain instances. The use of a bidirectional printer connection 145 permits the printer 140 to convey information about its status and condition back to the processor unit 110 over the same connection 145 that is used to transmit print commands and data from the processor unit 110 to the printer 140.

[0023] FIGURE 2 is an overview diagram of a typical computer system from a software perspective, and shows the software 200 that is associated with the computer system 100 of FIGURE 1. One perspective on the software elements of a computer system 100 is to view the various software elements as having a hierarchical relationship.

[0024] At the core of the software in a computer system is the kernel code 210. In the ubiquitous personal computer systems of the present day, this kernel is often stored on a Read Only Memory (ROM) chip. This kernel 210 is also sometimes referred to as the Basic Input/Output System (BIOS). This kernel 210 as stored in ROM is typically invariant during the entire operational life of the computer system 100.

[0025] The operating system 220 uses the kernel 210 as a gateway to the hardware of the computer system 100. The operating system 220 comprises a plurality of modules associated with different operating system functions. One such functionality that is often a part of an operating system is a printer driver 225.

[0026] The printer driver 225 is typically a specialized software element that interprets print request received

by the operating system in order to adapt to the print request to the specific configuration and capabilities of a specific printing device. Printer drivers are either bundled with the operating system as part of a standard distribution, or may be added later by a user after purchasing and installing a specific printer.

[0027] The operating system 220, in turn is invoked by one or more applications (shown as elements 241-248 in FIGURE 2) through various Application Program Interfaces (APIs) 230. The APIs 230 thus serve as a gateway to the operating system 220 from the point of view of the application programs 241-248.

[0028] FIGURE 3 is a simplified overview of the printing process in a typical ink-jet printer. A sheet of print medium 311 is fed into the print medium transport mechanism of an ink-jet printer 140 as shown by the directional arrow 305. Each sheet of print medium 311 may be transported through the printer by a variety of mechanisms. One of the mechanisms commonly used involves using pinch rollers to grip the edge of the print medium. Only one pair of pinch rollers 321 and 331 are shown in the simplified depiction of FIGURE 3. Typically, only one of each pair of pinch rollers 321 and 331 are driven by a motor in order to transport the print medium through the printer. The other pinch roller of such a pair is typically free-rolling.

[0029] As the sheet of print medium 311 moves through the printer 140, droplets of ink 335 are sprayed on to the print medium by the print head 340. The print head 340 typically comprises an electromagnetic mechanism to control the spray of ink droplets 335 from one or more ink cartridges (not shown in FIGURE 3). A print head that is capable of only black-and-white (or one-colour) printing typically contains only one ink cartridge. In contrast, a print head that is capable of multi-colour printing typically contains either three or four ink cartridges -- one cartridge for each of the three primary colours, and sometimes, a separate and additional fourth cartridge containing black ink for generating purer "blacks" than what is typically achieved by combining the three primary colours.

[0030] The print head 340 is typically much smaller than the width of a sheet of print medium 311. Consequently, the print head 340 is slidably mounted on a slider bar 342 in such a way as to permit the print head to traverse the entire width of the sheet of print medium being printed on. The print head 340 is connected to the printer control electronics 350 by a flexible electrical connection 345. As shown in FIGURE 3, such an ink-jet printer is capable of printing both text as well as colour graphics (as schematically illustrated at 391) on the sheet of print medium 311.

[0031] FIGURES 4A, 4B and 4C are, respectively, the simplified front, side and top, diagrammatic representations of the path of movement of the print medium in a typical ink-jet printer. As shown in FIGURE 4C, a sheet of print medium 311 may be gripped along one edge by one or more pinch rollers 321-327 at least one of which

is powered. The sheet of print medium 311 is sandwiched between associated pairs of a set of top pinch rollers 321-327 and a set of bottom pinch rollers 331-337 as shown in FIGURE 4B. The print medium path is indicated by the directional arrows 401, 402 and 403 in the respective front-view, side-view and top-view depicted in FIGURES 4A, 4B & 4C.

[0032] FIGURE 5 illustrates the details of a print head 340 in typical ink-jet printer. As shown in FIGURE 5, the print head 340 comprises an ink-jet cartridge 510 connected to an ejector mechanism 530. The printer cartridge 510 is often opaque as noted earlier and is also sometimes filled at the time of manufacture with spongy material 515 in order to regulate the rate of flow of ink from the cartridge 510 to the ejector mechanism 530. The ink cartridge 510 is connected to a reservoir 540 in the ejector mechanism 530. The ink reservoir 540 has an orifice 550 at its bottom end which is sized to generate ink drop 335 of a designed size.

[0033] As ink drops form and fall from the orifice 500 at the bottom of the ink reservoir 540, a plurality of electrostatic drivers 560 (two of which are shown in FIGURE 5) charge the ink drops in such a way as to propel each of the ink drops to a desired spot on the sheet of print medium 311.

[0034] In one aspect, the invention present is a technique and system for providing a calibrated graphical or digital display of remaining print capacity of a printer cartridge. The calibration of the print capacity display is designed to be in a user-friendly format, e.g., wherein the remaining print capacity is expressed in terms of the number of pages or days of printing that remains before the ink-jet cartridge needs replacement.

[0035] In one embodiment of the present invention, the remaining print capacity is estimated using retained information regarding prior printer usage patterns. In the preferred embodiment of the present invention, the printer driver module keeps track of the number of ink drops used by the print head since the last replacement of a printer cartridge. In the case of a printer having multiple ink cartridges, the printer driver keeps track of the ink usage of each of these cartridges separately.

[0036] The printer driver also keeps track of the cumulative number of pages printed and the date of last replacement of each of the ink-jet cartridges being monitored. Information about the average size of individual ink drops and the quantity of ink that is loaded into a cartridge at the time of manufacture is used to calibrate the graphical or digital ink level indicator of the present invention. In one embodiment of the present invention, the calibration is done based upon average-usage or expected-usage. Consequently, such (historical) estimation-based calibration is likely to be accurate to no more than about five percent (5%) of the actual ink usage.

[0037] The system and method of the present invention permits the remaining print capacity of a printer cartridge to be displayed in at least two display modes that may be selected by a user. Under the first option, a user

is provided an estimate of the remaining print capacity on a page scale. In an alternative embodiment, the user is provided information about the remaining print capacity on a day scale. These two display options provide a user with direct feed-back for an ink resupply decision. A user who uses an ink-jet printer only occasionally is likely to prefer the remaining print capacity display to be expressed in terms of the number of pages. On the other hand, when an ink-jet printer serves as a moderately- to heavily-loaded "work horse" of a small office or home office (SOHO) environment, it is likely that such users would like the print capacity display to be expressed in terms of the number of days remaining before the cartridge needs replacement.

[0038] In an extension of this calibration technique, the present invention permits the automated generation of warning messages when the remaining print capacity of one or more ink cartridges falls below a user-specified, heuristically-generated or manufacturer-specified threshold. As discussed earlier, these thresholds can be expressed in absolute (i.e. volumetric) or relative (i.e. fractional terms or in terms of remaining number of pages or days.

[0039] Using the information from the printer driver to calibrate the remaining print capacity of ink cartridge, the threshold can be used to trigger a user alert warning of a low ink condition. Such a threshold may be specified either in terms of pages, days or as a percentage of design (initial capacity). The resulting alert message can be generated as an audible signal, as a visual warning, or both. In an extension of the present technique, the user may be automatically provided with specific cartridge part number information when such an alert is generated. This information can optionally be printed out for use by the customer or may be used to connect the customer directly to an on-line ordering service or other similar instrumentality of electronic commerce.

[0040] FIGURE 6 is a block diagram showing the details of the ink-level calibration, monitoring and reporting system of the present invention. As noted earlier, when a user wishes to print information from within an application program 241, the user issues a print command from inside the application. This print command, in turn, invokes one or more printing related APIs 231 in a Microsoft Windows-based programming environment. The print-related APIs 231, in turn, invoke the printer driver 225 that causes the requisite print commands and data to be transmitted to the printer 140 over the bidirectional printer connection 145 as shown by the bidirectional arrow 615 in FIGURE 6.

[0041] In the preferred embodiment of the present invention, the printer driver software 225 comprises a usage measurement module 630. This usage measurement module keeps track of the print commands and data sent by the printer driver software 225 to the printer 140. The usage measurement module stores this and other information related to the calibration, monitoring and reporting of printer ink levels in an ink-usage data-

base 620.

[0042] In the preferred embodiment of the present invention, the ink usage database 620 comprises, inter alia, a cartridge characteristics field 621, a cartridge replacement date field 622, a cumulative usage counter 623, and a cartridge ordering information field 629. The cartridge characteristics field 621 includes information about the average size of an ink drop associated with a specific type of ink cartridge. The cartridge replacement date field 622 serves as a reference for a counter for monitoring and cumulating the ink usage.

[0043] The cumulative usage counter 623 is a stored data field that is generated by either actual measurement of the number of ink drops generated by the print head since the last replacement of the cartridge or by estimating the ink usage using certain print heuristics 624 stored within the ink usage database 620. The cartridge ordering information field 629 includes information about the part number and the manufacturer of the ink cartridge and other associated information needed or useful in generating a paper purchase order or in issuing an electronic purchase command.

[0044] The usage measurement module 630 keeps track of the ink usage in an ink-jet printer and has certain additional capabilities as discussed below. Every time an application program sends a print request and associated data to printer driver 225 for relaying to the printer 140, the usage measurement module 630 uses certain print heuristics 624 stored in the ink usage database 620 to determine the amount of ink that would be used up in completing the print request. Based upon user-input or stored information about the characteristics of a cartridge such as, but not limited to, its designed ink capacity and the average droplet size, the usage measurement module 630 calculates the cumulative ink usage since the last replacement of the printer cartridge 510. The updated cumulative usage information is stored in the ink usage database 620 after completed each print request.

[0045] When a user wishes to determine the remaining print capacity of an ink cartridge, the user issues a query 610 to the printer driver 225. The printer driver 225, in turn, queries the usage measurement module 630. The usage measurement module 630 uses information from the ink usage database 620 to calculate or estimate (as discussed below) the amount of ink remaining in the cartridge in question. The calculated or estimated print capacity of the ink cartridge is then displayed on the display 120 via the display APIs 232.

[0046] In one embodiment of the present invention, the remaining print capacity display is depicted both graphically/digitally (i.e., using the ink level scale described earlier) as well as in practical terms such as in terms of the number of pages or days of printing that may be expected from the ink cartridge in question.

[0047] In an alternative embodiment of the present invention, a user may set a cartridge replacement warning level by specifying a replacement threshold 640 to the

printer driver 225. The replacement threshold may optionally be varied by the user. In such a case, the usage measurement module 630 continually compares the remaining capacity of an ink cartridge with the user-defined or pre-specified replacement threshold 640. When the remaining print capacity of an ink cartridge falls below the replacement threshold 640, the usage measurement module 630 automatically generates a warning alert to the user's computer.

[0048] This warning alert may be either aural or visual. The aural alert option causes a sound signal to be generated by the computer alerting the user that the remaining print capacity has fallen below the pre-specified replacement threshold 640. In the case of the visual display option, the printer driver 225 generates a screen message to the user warning of the anticipated need for planning the replacement of the ink cartridge.

[0049] In an extension of the present invention, the crossing of the replacement threshold 640 causes the usage measurement module 630 of the printer drive 225 to generate a form for use by the user in ordering a replacement cartridge. Such a replacement order may also be communicated through the modem 150 to the Internet 160 or other instruments of electronic commerce over a telecommunications link 155.

[0050] It should be noted that instead of determining actual ink consumption, the usage measurement module 630 may alternatively estimate the ink consumption based upon statistical information such as the average amount of ink used per page of print medium. The usage measurement module 630 could also use other print heuristics. For example, the usage measurement module 630 could retain historical information about the frequency of ink cartridge replacement. Other print heuristics that could be used to generate warnings regarding the eminent exhaustion of ink in an ink cartridge include adaptive estimation of the remaining print capacity based upon past usage patterns.

[0051] FIGURES 7A & 7B are two exemplary illustrations of the graphical page-scale ink-level display scheme of the present invention. FIGURES 8A & 8B are two exemplary illustrations of the graphical day-scale ink-level display scheme of the present invention.

[0052] It should be emphasized that the calibration, monitoring and reporting of ink and toner levels in ink and laser-printer cartridges have great systemic and functional similarity, and the above description relating to ink cartridges is equally applicable to similar issues involving laser-printer cartridges.

[0053] Although a preferred embodiment of the method and apparatus of the present invention has been illustrated in the accompanying drawings and described in the foregoing detailed description, it is to be understood that the invention is not limited to the embodiment(s) disclosed, but is capable of numerous rearrangements, modifications and substitutions without departing from the spirit of the invention as set forth and defined by the following claims.

Claims

1. A system capable of handling print requests directed at a cartridge-based printing device that can additionally provide a calibrated graphical display of remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge, said system comprising:

software operable to estimate the ink or toner consumption associated with a print request; a database of information about the ink or toner capacity of a cartridge and the cumulative estimated ink or toner consumption associated with the print cartridge; and software responsive to print heuristics operable to estimate the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge.

2. The system of Claim 1 for providing a calibrated graphical display of estimated remaining print capacity associated with a print cartridge, wherein said remaining print capacity is estimated in terms of the number of pages that may be printed using said print cartridge.

3. The system of Claim 1 for providing a calibrated graphical display of estimated remaining print capacity associated with a print cartridge, wherein said remaining print capacity is estimated in terms of the number of days of printing that may be accomplished using said print cartridge.

4. The system of Claim 1 for providing a calibrated graphical display of estimated remaining print capacity associated with a print cartridge, wherein said remaining print capacity is estimated as a fraction of the initial print capacity of said print cartridge.

5. A system capable of handling print requests directed at a cartridge-based printing device that can additionally provide a calibrated graphical display of remaining print capacity associated with the printer cartridge, said system comprising:

usage measurement software operable to measure the ink or toner consumption associated with a print request; a database of information about the ink or toner capacity of a print cartridge and the cumulative measured ink or toner consumption associated with the print cartridge; and software responsive to print heuristics operable to estimate the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge.

6. The system of Claim 5 for providing a calibrated graphical display of estimated remaining print capacity associated with a print cartridge, wherein

said remaining print capacity is estimated in terms of the number of pages that may be printed using said print cartridge.

7. The system of Claim 5 for providing a calibrated graphical display of estimated remaining print capacity associated with a print cartridge, wherein said remaining print capacity is estimated in terms of the number of days of printing that may be accomplished using said print cartridge.
8. The system of Claim 5 for providing a calibrated graphical display of estimated remaining print capacity associated with a printer cartridge, wherein said remaining print capacity is estimated as a fraction of the initial print capacity of said cartridge.
9. A system capable of handling print requests directed at a cartridge-based printing device that can additionally generate an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the printer cartridge falls below a preset threshold, said system comprising:
 - usage measurement software operable to calculate the ink or toner consumption associated with a print request;
 - a database of information about the ink or toner capacity of a cartridge and the cumulative calculated ink or toner consumption associated with the print cartridge;
 - software responsive to print heuristics operable to estimate the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge; and
 - software responsive to the remaining print capacity falling below the preset threshold operable to generate an alert signal.
10. The system of Claim 9 for generating an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge falls below a preset threshold, wherein said usage measurement software calculates the ink or toner consumption associated with a print by estimation.
11. The system of Claim 9 for generating an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge falls below a preset threshold, wherein said usage measurement software calculates the ink or toner consumption associated with a print by actual measurement.
12. The system of Claim 9 for generating an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge falls below a preset threshold, wherein said preset threshold is specified in terms of the number of pages that may be printed using said print cartridge.

13. The system of Claim 9 for generating an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge falls below a preset threshold, wherein said preset threshold is specified in terms of the number of days of printing that may be accomplished using said print cartridge.
14. The system of Claim 9 for generating an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge falls below a preset threshold, wherein said preset threshold is specified as a fraction of the initial print capacity of said print cartridge.
15. The system of Claim 9 for generating an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge falls below a preset threshold, wherein said alert signal is a sound signal.
16. The system of Claim 9 for generating an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge falls below a preset threshold, wherein said alert signal is a visual signal.
17. The system of Claim 16 for generating an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge falls below a preset threshold, wherein said visual alert signal is displayed at the printer.
18. The system of Claim 16 for generating an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge falls below a preset threshold, wherein said visual alert signal is displayed on a computer monitor.
19. The system of Claim 9 for generating an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge falls below a preset threshold, wherein said print cartridge is an ink cartridge of an ink-jet printer.
20. The system of Claim 9 for generating an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the print cartridge falls below a preset threshold, wherein said print cartridge is a toner cartridge of a laser printer.
21. A method of handling print requests directed at a cartridge-based printing device that can additionally generate an automatic warning when the remaining print capacity associated with the printer cartridge falls below a preset threshold, said method comprising the steps of:
 - calculating the ink or toner consumption asso-

ciated with a print request;
maintaining a database of information about
the ink or toner capacity of a cartridge and the
cumulative calculated ink or toner consumption
associated with the print cartridge;
using print heuristics to estimate the remaining
print capacity associated with the print car-
tridge; and
generating an alert signal responsive to the re-
maining print capacity falling below the preset
threshold.

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22. A method of handling print requests directed at a
cartridge-based printing device that can additionally
provide a calibrated graphical display of remaining
print capacity associated with the print cartridge,
said method comprising the steps of:

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estimating the ink or toner consumption asso-
ciated with a print request;
maintaining a database of information about
the ink or toner capacity of a cartridge and the
cumulative estimated ink or toner consumption
associated with the print cartridge; and
using print heuristics to estimate the remaining
print capacity associated with the print car-
tridge.

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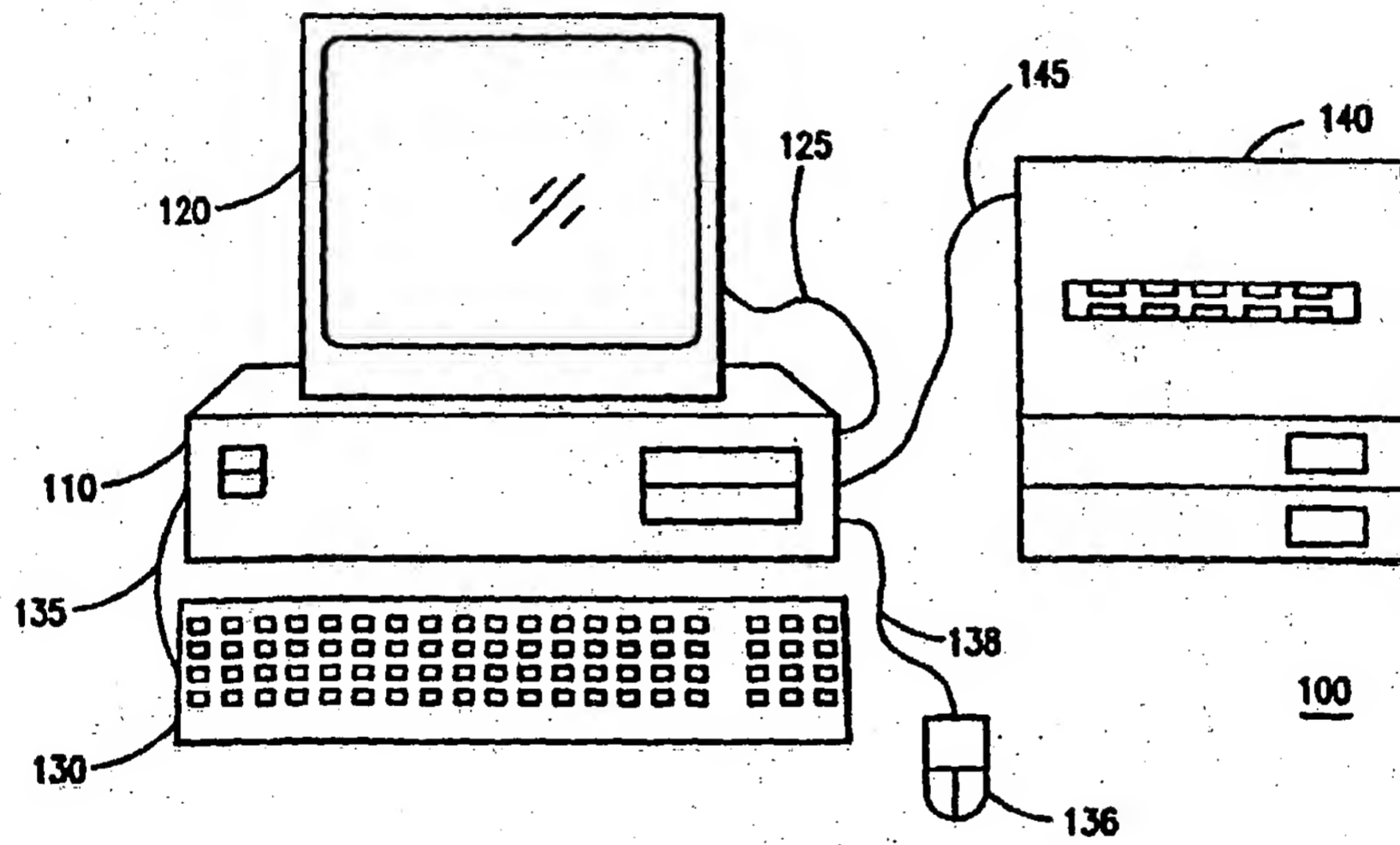


FIG. 1

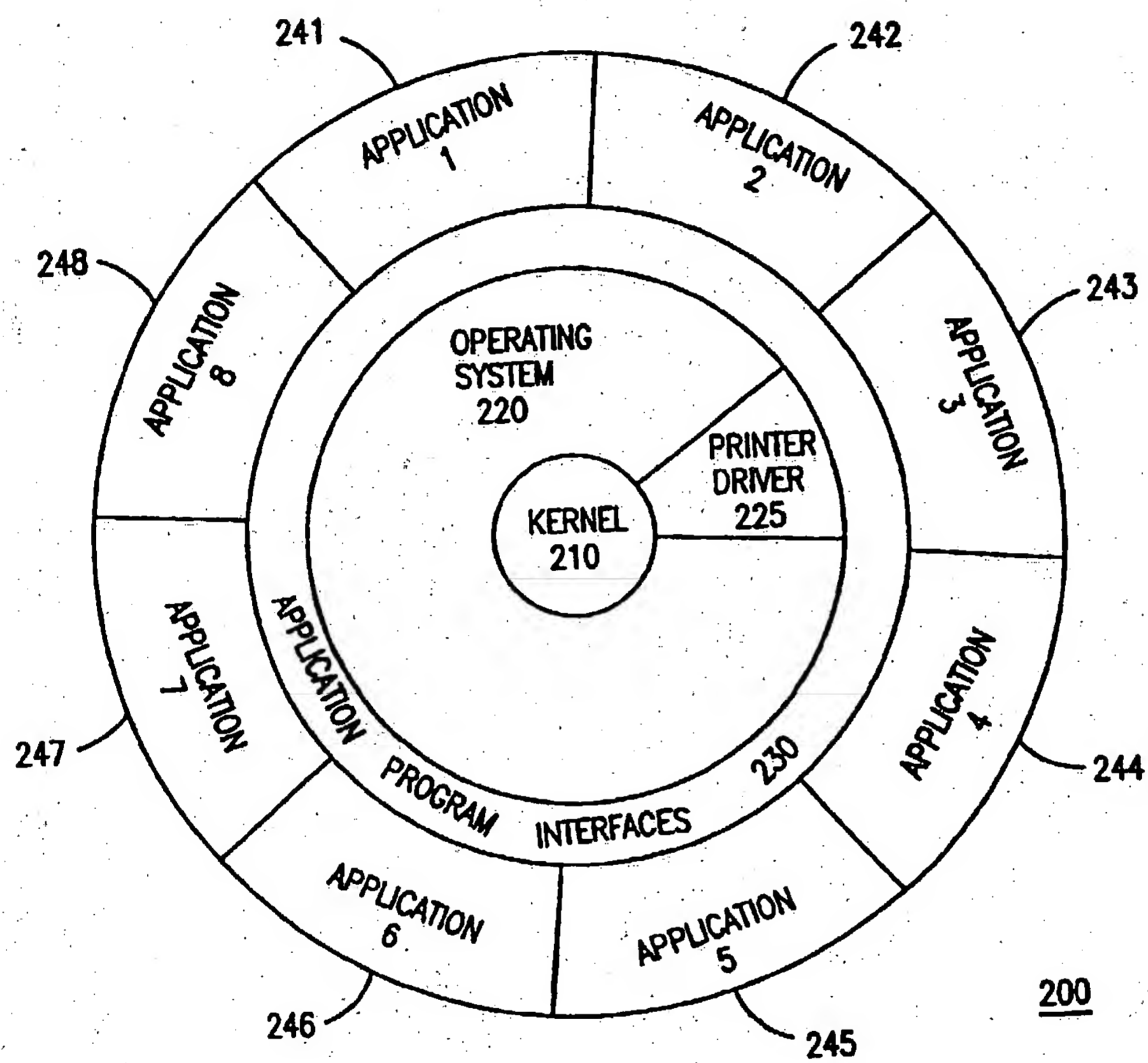
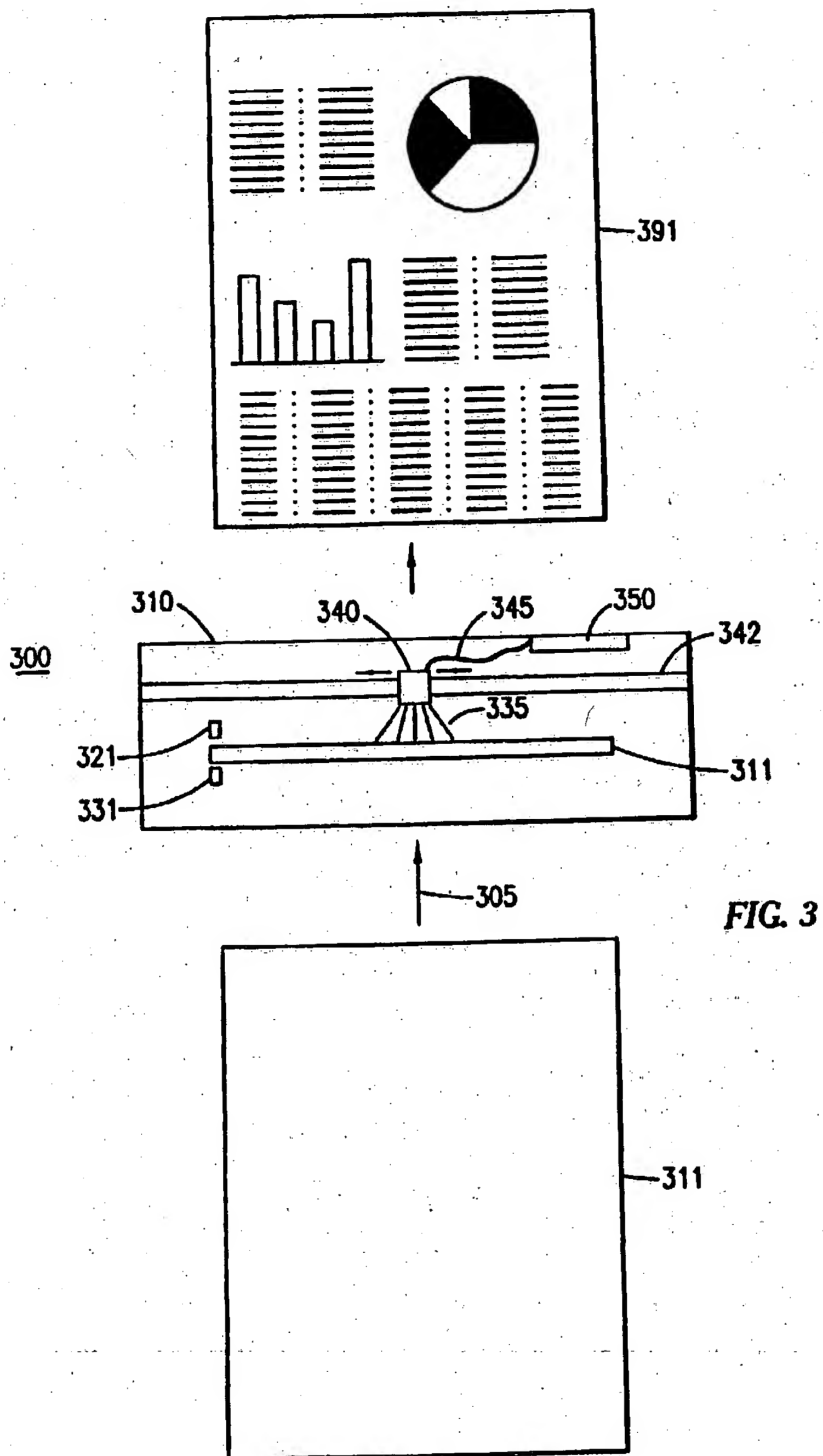


FIG. 2



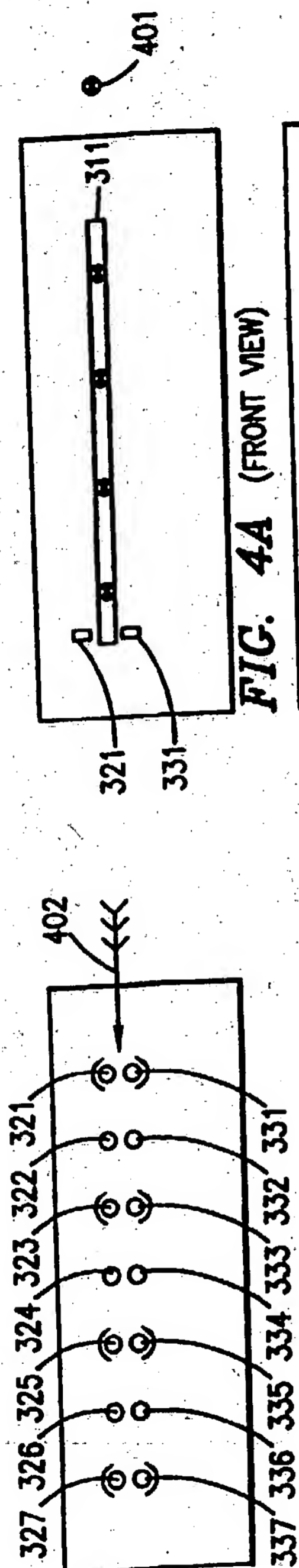


FIG. 4B (SIDE VIEW)

200

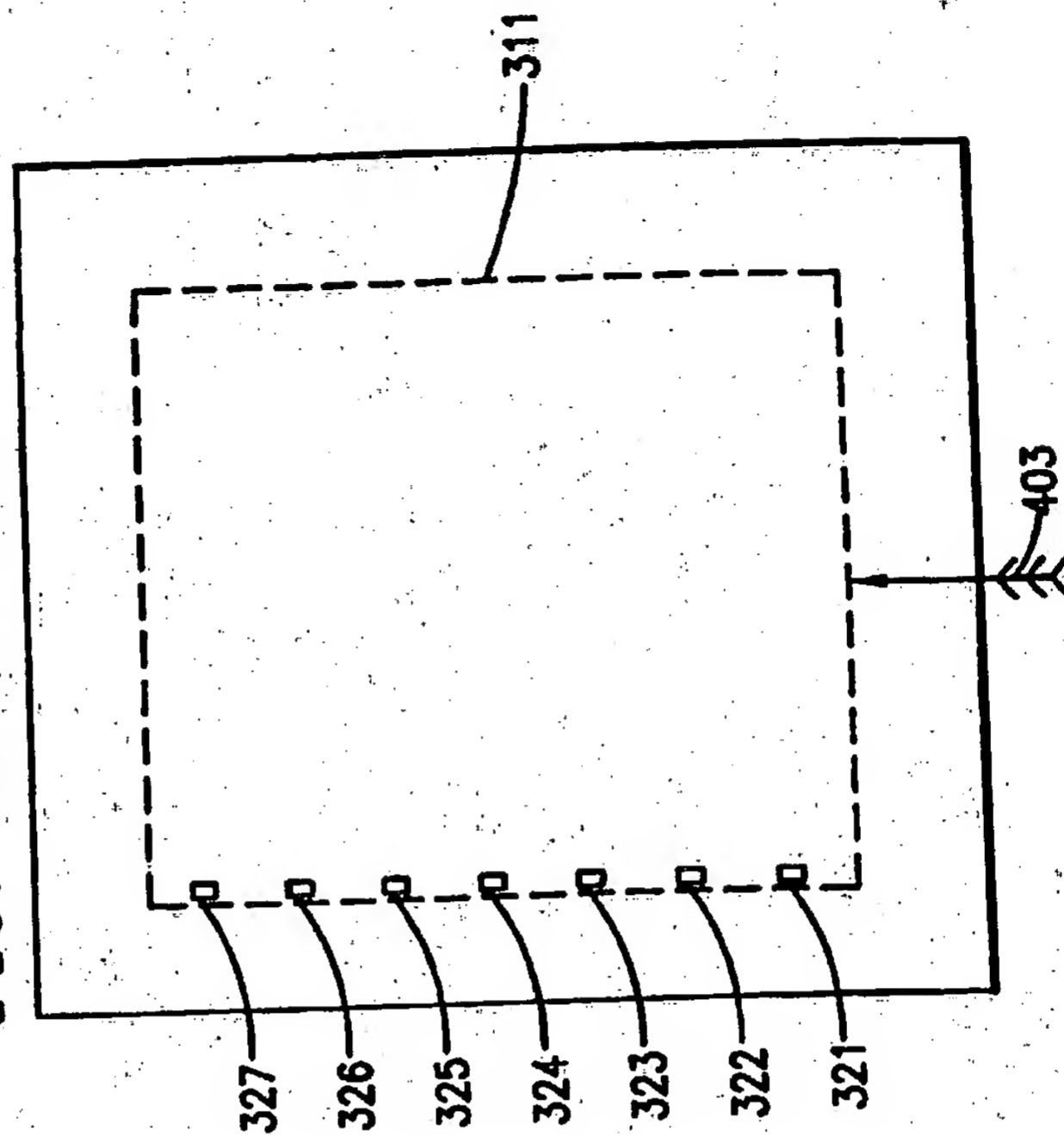


FIG. 4C (TOP VIEW)

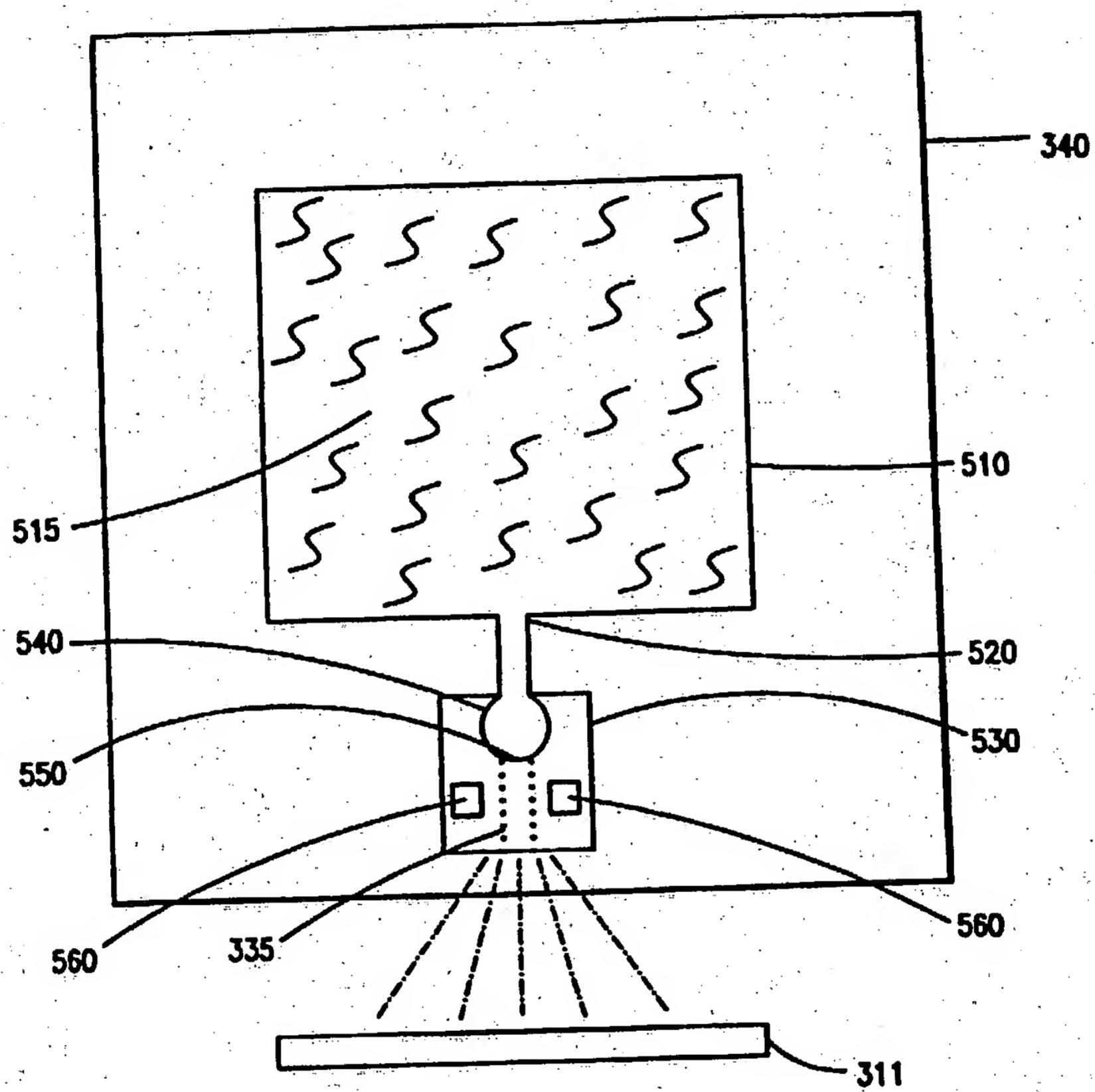


FIG. 5

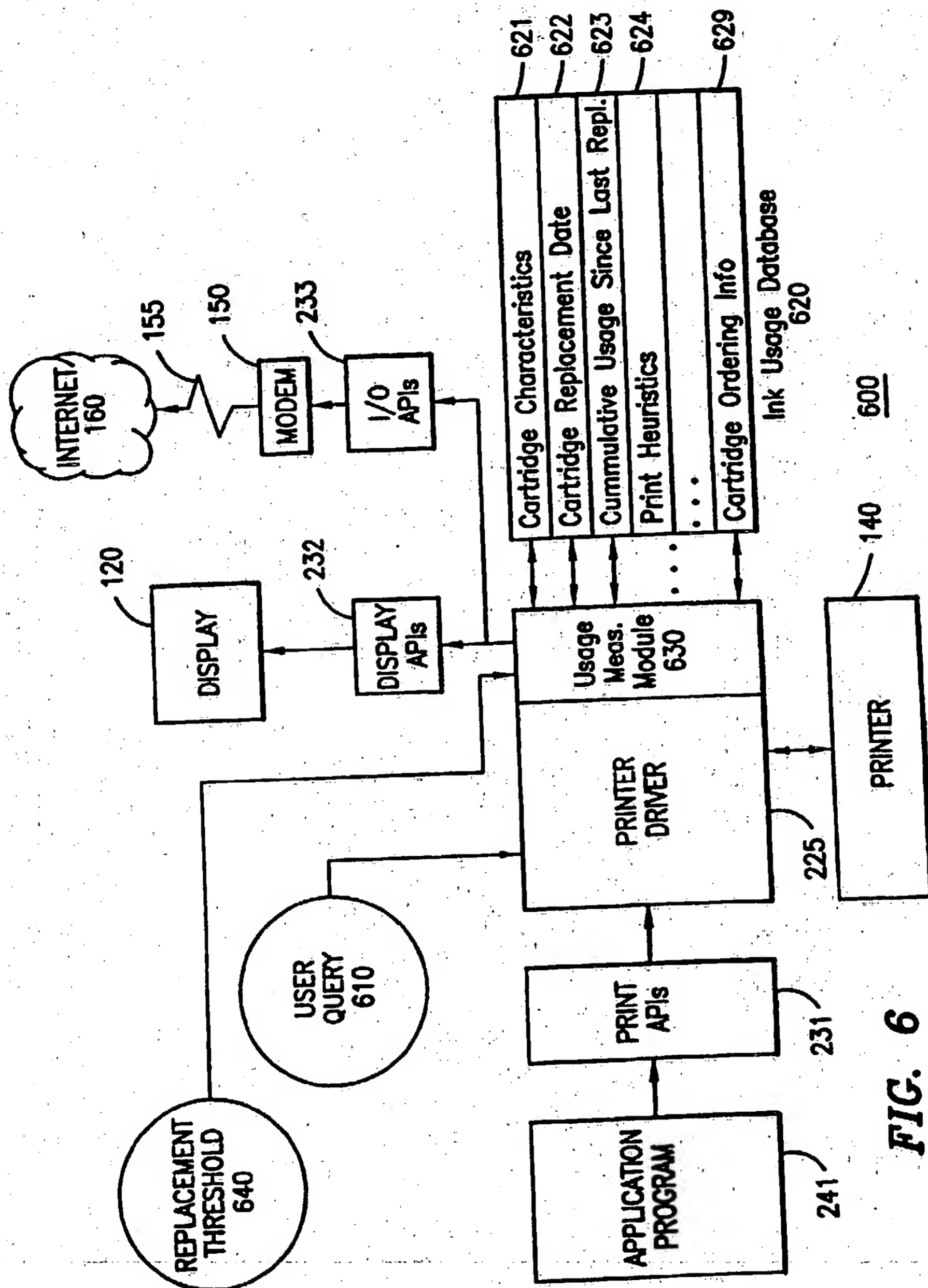


FIG. 6

REMAINING PRINT CAPACITY OF CARTRIDGE N

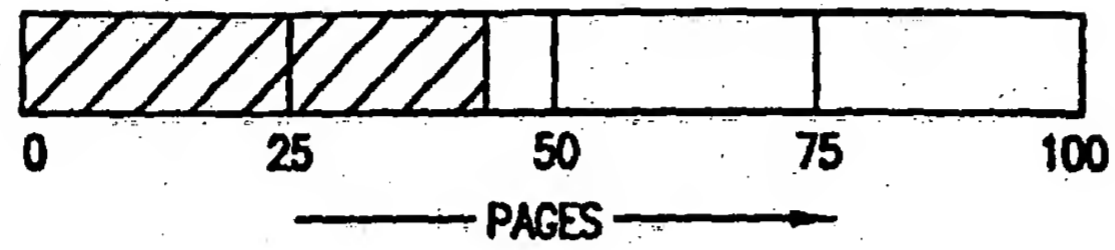


FIG. 7A

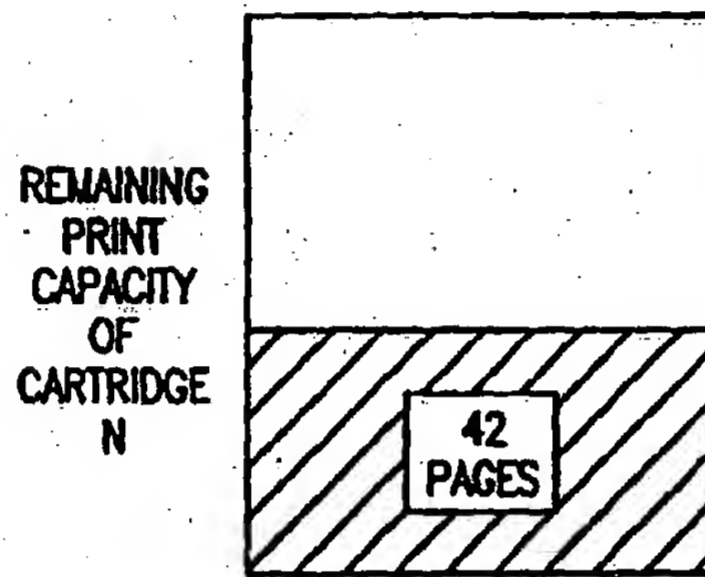


FIG. 7B

REMAINING PRINT CAPACITY OF CARTRIDGE N

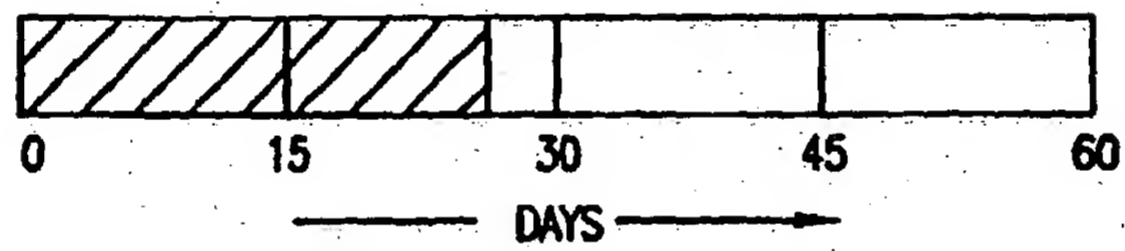


FIG. 8A

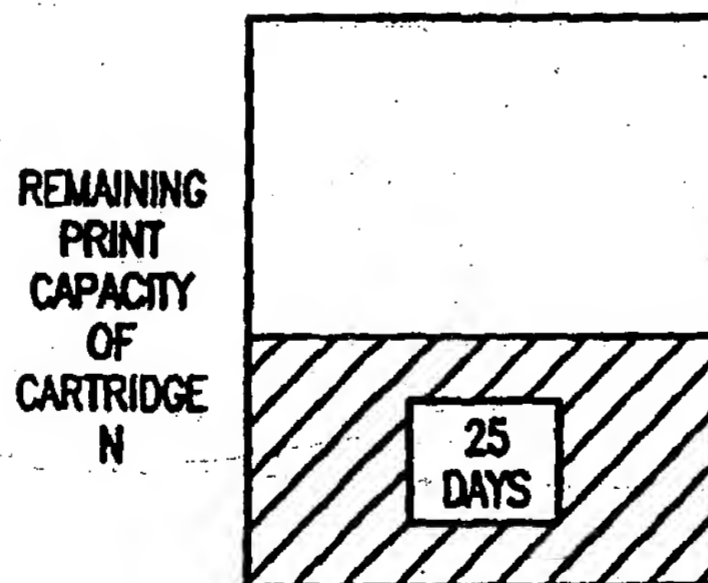


FIG. 8B